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ABSTRACT

Following a "dear colleagues" letter from John R. McKernan, Jr., Governor of Maine and 1991-92 chairman of the Education Commission of the States, a strategy is outlined that will help educational reformers to approach restructuring from varying perspectives and improve its chances for success. Several fundamental principles underlie successful strategies. They are based on the premises that: all children can learn; fundamental change is needed; no single policy change will transform the system; and the education system must be able to analyze and continually improve itself. Obstacles to reform are identified and the actions that constitute a comprehensive strategy for change are outlined. These include providing for continued leadership, setting a vision of a system that holds high expectations for learning, translating the vision into policy and practice, realigning the state system to support the new vision, and focusing on results. (RR)

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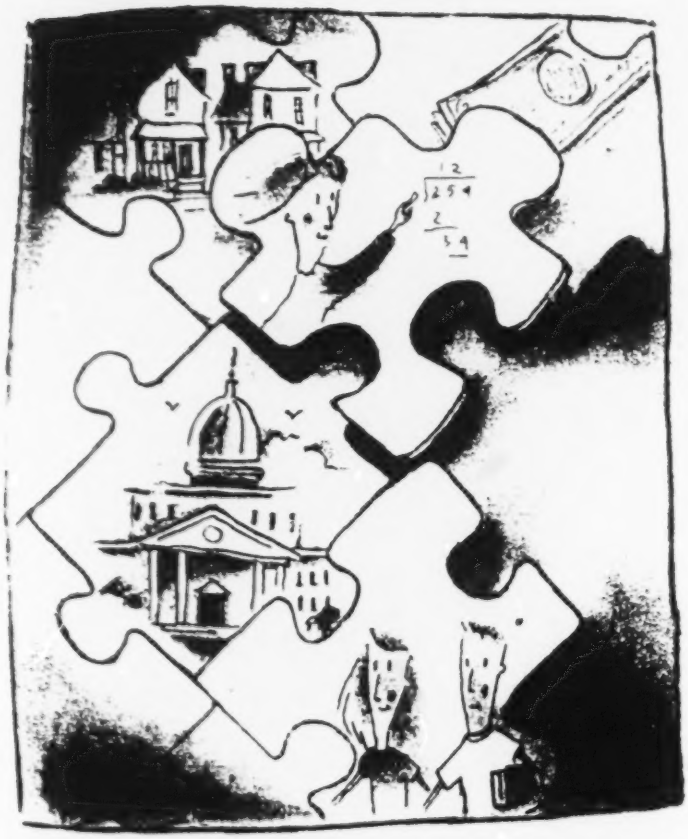
Restructuring the Education System



KEEPING THE PROMISES OF REFORM: A STATE STRATEGY

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DEAR COLLEAGUES:

This is an exciting time for education reform in America. In the past decade, states were the testing grounds for ways to improve the education system. But now we are talking about school reform in new ways. We have begun to envision a new education system that will help all children learn regardless of their background. We have begun to outline how the roles and responsibilities of everyone involved must change to make the vision real. In short, we have begun to tackle the critical need to make major changes in our school system. But we have not yet succeeded.

It is time to keep the promises we made — promises of equality, opportunity, dignity and full participation; the promise of an education system that respects diverse cultures and enables all students to learn. We must quit tinkering at the edges of the system and instead create a new, much better one. To do this requires a change in our approach; such a large goal cannot be addressed one piece at a time, as has been our practice; our efforts must become more systemic.

Making this kind of fundamental change in how schools operate to help children learn is an enormous endeavor, one that requires a thoughtful and comprehensive strategy to guide us. While states, districts and schools have made progress, it has become evident that restructuring is far more complicated than it first seemed. One reason is that changes in schools are contingent upon changes in district and state policy and practice. We have underestimated how interrelated and interdependent the different parts of the education system are.

This document is designed to move us further along toward the goal of a new education system by outlining a state strategy that will help us approach restructuring from all sides and improve our odds for success.

Sincerely,

John R. McKernan, Jr.
Governor of Maine
1991-92 ECS Chairman

Reforming Successfully

Several fundamental principles underlie successful strategies.

All children can learn. Although evidence shows all kids can learn, certain factors get in the way: (1) many children are not ready to learn because of preventable health or other impairments, (2) many educators do not expect certain children to learn, and (3) the school structure fails to counteract these conditions. Saying that all children can learn is the first step; now state, district and school leaders need to act on that promise.

Fundamental change is needed. Making small changes in the education system will not provide the student performance needed. It is necessary to change not only expectations of what students should know and be able to do but also of what schools should do to help children learn. This will require thoughtfulness in building on existing efforts, new roles and responsibilities for everyone in the system — from students to top state administrators — and different mechanisms for making decisions that affect students.

No single policy change will transform the system. There is no "silver bullet." For example, choice legislation alone will not radically change the education system, though it may be an important component of a broader state strategy. Rather, a coordinated, consistent set of policies is needed to change the climate of education in each state.

The education system must be able to analyze and continually improve itself. The current system tends to accept the status quo. Even a major reform, if it's undertaken once and considered "done," will not allow the system to respond to demands of a constantly changing society.

Obstacles to Reform

Several obstacles, however, stand in the way of success. Interviews with local educators, state political leaders and state education agency staff reveal these impediments to reform:

- Too many people are content with maintaining the status quo, an education system based on needs of a bygone time and not on a vision of an education system that will prepare students for participation in tomorrow's world.
- People working in the schools question whether there is a real, long-term commitment to major reform.
- Innovators need rewards and support; they seldom get either.
- Reform efforts do not spread easily from pilot sites to other schools in the state.
- School and policy leaders are confused by the growing number of reform efforts and question how these efforts fit with one another and pertain to their schools.
- Too few educators know how to lead reform efforts effectively, and too few policy makers know how to create a system that supports reform.
- A large gap exists between advocates of reform, who believe the education system is flawed, and others, including the general public and many educators, who believe their local school is fine and question the need for change.
- Adequate measures of progress in student learning and system reform do not exist.

Moving Reform Ahead

There is much state policy leaders can do to counter such obstacles and ensure success for all students. Any action, however, must be taken in the context of changing the entire education system — school, district, state. Further, decisions such as what students should know, what should be taught and how, and what training staff need, must complement one another. Changing one piece will not result in better student learning; the problem must be approached systemically, not piecemeal.

Although it may be difficult to move forward on all levels simultaneously, the following actions constitute a comprehensive strategy for change.

Provide Continued Leadership:

1. Learn about reform and restructuring. No one need start from scratch in trying to change the school system. Much has been written about school reform, and there are pilot efforts under way. Many communities and schools are struggling with fundamentally changing their education systems — and making progress. Policy makers, community leaders and educators need to examine these efforts to see how they can learn from the experience of others.

2. Develop a communications strategy.
The public does not understand why schools need to be restructured or what restructuring means. Successfully changing the education system requires clear, concise communication with the public and all involved about why restructuring is necessary, what the goals are and how the plan will be accomplished.

A communications strategy includes developing a message and materials to support the vision and goals. It also includes coordinating local and state media strategies to get the message across to all persons affected — parents, students, business, educators, politicians — in short, everyone in the community.

3. Establish a broad-based public/private coalition.
For top-to-bottom changes to take place, there must be support from within and outside the education system. Without it, the promise of reform is doomed. Coalitions should include parents, business, political and community leaders in cooperation with teachers, administrators and board members. Such a coalition can ensure long-term commitment to reform strategies, sustain restructuring efforts through economic downturns and changes in political leadership, and serve as an advocate for the public's needs and desires.

Set a Vision of a System That Holds High Expectations for Learning:

1. Shift the focus to student learning.
To date, those who manage the education system have concentrated on what goes into the classroom, such as teacher certification, course requirements and textbook selection. Now it's time to fulfill the promise of engaging and improving learning for all students.

2. Identify what students should know and be able to do.
Every state should have an outline of what students are expected to know, understand and be able to do. Educators, parents and other constituents must be included in setting expectations that will allow students to take advantage of future opportunities promised by society.

3. Develop a vision of the system that will help students meet those expectations.
Public schools look surprisingly similar across the country, but that "look" comes from a vision of what students needed for an earlier era. The new vision should be based on the skills and knowledge students will need for the future, be commonly shared and specify how the system will create an environment that helps schools reach new goals for students. Strategies to develop a broadly shared vision include holding conversations with all interested parties both within and outside the school system, assessing the compatibility of existing approaches and linking the vision to national reform efforts.

Translate the Vision Into Policy and Practice:

1. Conduct a policy audit of the current system.
Examine existing policies and practices to determine what gets in the way of change. Look at issues such as: What are the political barriers? What are the current reform efforts and are they working? What is known about student achievement under the current system? How do current policies influence curriculum, instruction, assessment, teacher development, etc.?

2. Remove barriers to reform.
Early in the process, those leading reform should send this message to the individuals who work in agencies, districts and schools — risk-taking to promote the vision and help students reach expectations will be supported. This can be accomplished in several ways: One, provide schools and districts with waivers from policies that get in the way of change. Two, in exchange for more accountability, give persons closest to the classroom more responsibility for ensuring that all students learn. Three, look for private resources to supplement start-up costs of restructuring and pilot sites.

3. Provide support for a thorough redesign of curriculum and instruction.
Educators, in collaboration with parents and the community, must change curriculum and instructional methods so they support new expectations and fit individual student learning styles.

4. Develop and use new forms of assessment.
Assessment measures must be keyed to new expectations for student learning, such as ability to think, reason and analyze, not just a student's ability to memorize. They also, like curriculum and instruction, should take into account a broad range of learning styles. For example, instead of relying solely on multiple-choice tests to determine math ability, students could be asked to demonstrate the steps they used to find the answer. Students also could develop portfolios that show progress over time.

Business organizations such as the National Alliance of Business, the national Business Roundtable and the Council for Aid to Education have numerous publications describing how businesses can become involved in school restructuring efforts. In addition, the states of Maine and South Carolina have excellent examples of effective broad-based coalitions.

Maine's Common Core of Learning is a statement of what students should know and be able to do in four areas when they graduate from high school: personal and global stewardship, communication, reasoning and problem solving, and the human record. In addition to Maine, Connecticut, Vermont and California used a public process to define expectations for their students.

The Pittsburgh Public Schools, Harvard University's Project Zero and the Educational Testing Service teamed up to design "footprints," an assessment program that included sketches, works-in-progress, self-evaluations, classroom exercises and journal entries in creative writing, graphic arts and musical performance.

In Idaho, North Carolina and Arizona, the K-12 and higher education sectors are working together to develop a joint state plan for education reform.

New Mexico's 21st Century Education legislation requires all public school districts to prepare "report cards" that will allow district-by-district comparisons. Districts must be accountable for student achievement, college examination scores, dropout rates, costs per student and other measures.

Maine Governor John R. McKernan, Jr., 1991-92 ECS chairman, is a leading advocate for education reform in Maine and New England. His tenure as Maine's first Republican governor in two decades has been marked by new initiatives designed to increase accountability and strengthen curriculum.

A native of Bangor, McKernan attended Dartmouth College and received his law degree from the University of Maine School of Law. He represented Maine for four years in the U.S. Congress, where he served on the Education and Labor Committee. He was a partner in a Portland, Maine, law firm and also served four years as a state legislator.

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ECS is a nonprofit, nationwide interstate compact formed in 1965 to help governors, state legislators, state education officials and others develop policies to improve the quality of education at all levels.

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For more information about **Restructuring the Education System**, see other publications in this series:
A Consumer's Guide (SI-91-4), $8. *Building Private Sector and Community Support* (SI-91-3), $4; *Communication* (SI-91-5), $4. Additional copies of this report (SI-91-2) are also $4. The set of four publications is $15 plus $3 postage and handling. To order publications or get more information on restructuring, contact the Education Commission of the States, 707 17th Street, Suite 2700, Denver, Colorado 80202; 303-299-3600.

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5. **Educate teachers and administrators to carry out new responsibilities.**
School restructuring will not succeed unless teachers and principals know how to do new tasks required of them. There are two facets to this requirement: Teacher and administrator preparation programs need to train prospective educators to understand and work effectively in schools that are restructuring. Incoming educators should have clinical experience in restructured schools, working with faculty who model the new skills required.

Likewise, inservice education opportunities for existing staff should be reshaped according to state goals for school restructuring. This will require that states, districts and schools recognize and support professional development as a necessary investment.

6. **Include parents, employers and community members as partners in reform.**
Parent-involvement and mentoring programs are effective ways of getting adults into the schools and involved with children.

7. **Use state financing mechanisms to encourage innovation and success.**
Financial resources should be invested in helping schools and districts make the shift from the status quo. States can offer additional funds, such as competitive grants, as levers for change. But tough financial times should not mean an end to innovative efforts. State officials should examine how their state's financing mechanisms can be revised or how funds can be redistributed to support restructuring goals.

Realign the State System to Support the New Vision:

1. **Restructure the state education department.**
The role of the state education department should be changed from monitoring, compliance and regulation to one of assistance to schools and districts. Such a switch in role means the department will need to retrain its staff for their new responsibilities and bring in additional expertise.

2. **Change the manner in which education, health and social services are provided.**
Link education system reform with more effective and better coordinated health, education and social services for infants and preschoolers. At the middle and high school levels, work with juvenile justice and other youth-serving agencies to focus services for teens.

3. **Connect K-12 reform with efforts to improve teaching and learning in higher education.**
As students move through the restructured education system, they will bring different skills and knowledge to postsecondary education. Those institutions will need to change their practice to effectively serve these students.

Focus on Results:

1. **Establish pilot sites.**
Start by using local sites to demonstrate how fundamental principles of restructuring work in real life. Over the longer term, use those results to reshape the education system. What works in one classroom or school may not work in another, but each site serves as an example for others to learn from and adapt to their locale. Incentives are also needed to move from demonstration sites to systemwide reform.

2. **Create new forms of accountability.**
A restructured education system requires leadership by people throughout the system and community, not just those in administrative and policy roles. In addition, sound accountability policy should include rewards for schools that improve and succeed and assistance (ultimately, sanctions) for those that fail. Another important step is to report public data on the performance of every school and college. This will establish benchmarks by which to gauge future progress.

In summary, policy makers have ample experience working with the individual pieces of education policy, which has resulted in a fragmented system. The next challenge is to view policy, roles and structure as a package. The call is for every state to fulfill its promise to students and their families by restructuring its education system.

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